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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF ADMIRAL STAVRIDIS

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

1. (C) Post welcomes the December 2-7 visit of Admiral Stavridis, SOUTHCOM Commander, to Colombia. With U.S. assistance, Colombia is fighting a war on four fronts -- FARC, ELN, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers -- with a mix of political, military, and police measures. A multi-phased offensive by the security forces has re-taken key territory from the FARC, but the terrorist group remains active. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for nearly four years; their safe recovery continues to be a top priority. The GOC suspended outreach to the FARC on a humanitarian exchange of hostages for imprisoned terrorists after a FARC attack in Bogota in October. The paramilitary peace process has led to the demobilization of over 30,000 terrorists and to revelations of paramilitary influence in Colombia's Congress. Colombia's human rights record, although imperfect, is improving. President Uribe was reelected in May with 62 percent of the vote; we expect close bilateral relations to continue. The Colombian economy continues to improve. End Summary.

U.S. Assistance Key to Security Improvements

2. (SBU) USG security assistance is designed to combat the interrelated threats of drug trafficking and terrorism, and includes training, material aid, and guidance to security forces and other institutions. President Uribe considers U.S. assistance to be critical to the GOC's "Democratic Security" policy - aimed at establishing a state presence throughout national territory - and views the United States as Colombia's most important ally.

-- Plan Patriota: The military's multi-phased campaign to re-take areas dominated by the FARC is in its third year. The first phase, which focused on securing Cundinamarca Department surrounding Bogota, pushed the FARC back from the capital and resulted in the deaths of at least five mid-level FARC commanders. The second, more complex phase, is two years old and is focused on the FARC's traditional stronghold in southern Colombia. The operation has disrupted the FARC's hold on the region, but sustainment of troops in this isolated region is difficult. Infectious diseases - especially leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin infection - and landmines are the leading causes of military casualties.

-- The May presidential elections were the least violent in recent history, and crime and violence have fallen sharply in recent years. Despite the broad improvements in security,

however, the FARC continues to launch attacks on infrastructure and isolated or smaller police and military targets throughout the country, while avoiding direct conflict with larger units. In October, the FARC exploded car bombs at several military installations, and a FARC siege of a rural police station left 17 police dead.

-- Center for Coordinated Integral Action: With U.S. support, the GOC formed in 2005 an interagency center to facilitate delivery of social services in seven areas that have traditionally lacked state presence and been controlled by illegal armed groups. The Center focuses on providing immediate social services, including documentation and medical care, and longer-term economic development projects. More than 40,000 individuals have been enrolled in state health care. Judges, investigators, and public defenders have been placed in all 16 municipalities of the Plan Patriota area. A public library was opened in early 2006 in San Vicente del Caguan, which had long been dominated by the FARC.

-- Plan Colombia II: The GOC has provided Washington with a draft proposal of Plan Colombia II. Most of the program areas outlined continue the same goals the U.S. has supported since Plan Colombia's inception in 2000. The programs and projected costs of this next phase of the Plan are under discussion by a U.S. interagency working group.

Regional Issues: Venezuela and Ecuador

¶3. (C) With president Uribe's reelection, we expect Colombia to play a more active diplomatic role in the region. The GOC is working to promote economic integration and security cooperation in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Andes. Still, its top priority remains its relationship with its neighbors. Colombia wants to avoid polarization in the Andes, and is committed to dialogue rather than confrontation. The GOC is concerned about Venezuela's arms build-up and has begun to divert needed resources away from counter-drug and counter-terror priorities. Uribe remains wary of Chavez's intentions in the region, but prefers to manage the Chavez problem rather than confront it directly.

¶4. (C) Colombia and Ecuador continue to grapple with the FARC's presence in Ecuador, as well as the estimated 250,000 Colombians residing there. In late January, the Colombian military entered Ecuadorian territory while pursuing the FARC. The Government of Ecuador demanded an apology, which the GOC provided, despite frustration with the lack of Ecuadorian cooperation against the FARC. The apology eased tensions, but GOC border incursions continue to generate friction. Ecuador's international efforts to end aerial eradication along the two countries' shared border led the GOC to suspend spraying in January. The U.S. is concerned about the suspension, which has led to an explosion in coca cultivation along the border.

Internal Politics

¶5. (SBU) President Uribe is the first Colombian president to be re-elected to a second, consecutive term in over 100 years. He was re-elected on May 28 with 62 percent of the vote. A coalition of pro-Uribe parties won a collective majority in the House and Senate on March 12; however, his congressional coalition is fragile, and Uribe faces challenges in securing support for tax and fiscal reform proposals. Recent revelations of ties between Colombian congressmen and paramilitaries affect all parties, but will likely make it harder for Uribe to count on a solid legislative majority.

Positive Economic Outlook

¶6. (U) Security gains have helped boost the Colombian economy. In 2005, Colombia's gross domestic product (GDP) grew 5.2 and inflation was 4.9 percent, the lowest rate in 50 years. The first quarter of 2006 also started off strong with 5.2 percent growth. Unemployment has fallen from 18 percent in 2002 to a little more than 11 percent in May 2006. Most of the major rating agencies upgraded Colombia to investment grade in late 2005 and early 2006.

¶7. (SBU) The U.S. and Colombia signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement on November 22, 2006. The agreement will provide stronger IP protection and give increased market access to key U.S. industrial and agricultural exports. For Colombia, the agreement creates a more attractive investment climate, locks in ATPDEA benefits, boosts its sugar quota, and addresses some of its concerns regarding U.S. sanitary and phyto-sanitary regulations. The FTA must now be ratified by the U.S. and Colombian Congresses.

Drug Eradication and Interdiction

¶8. (SBU) Interdiction operations in 2005 met or exceeded 2004's record seizures. GOC security forces destroyed 134 cocaine HCl processing laboratories in 2005 and seized record amounts of processed cocaine (223 metric tons) and coca base. As of August 1, 2006, the GOC had destroyed 92 HCl labs and seized over 85 metric tons of processed cocaine and coca base.

¶9. (SBU) The GOC claims it manually eradicated 40,000 hectares of coca in 2006. Manual eradication is a high-cost, high-risk program that combines illicit crop eradication with job creation, and avoids the health and environmental controversies surrounding aerial eradication. President Uribe is a proponent of manual eradication. He launched an ambitious program in January to manually eradicate coca in La Macarena National Park. The U.S. supported this effort, but FARC attacks killed 12 policemen and civilian eradicators in February and March, and another 6 eradicators on August 1. The GOC has set a goal of 50,000 hectares for 2007.

Development and Democracy Building

¶10. (U) Beyond counternarcotics and counter-terrorism assistance, the U.S. also funds programs to promote good governance, economic development, and humanitarian assistance. Democratic Governance programs aim to improve the transparency of the justice system, assist the peace process, promote respect for human rights, support democratic processes and foster efficiency and accountability. The U.S. also funds to promote legal alternative development through increased competitiveness, improved local government infrastructure and management, and a more favorable environment for investment and trade. We support to nearly 2.5 million Colombians displaced by internal violence, and also help children who have been forced to serve as child combatants.

Improved Human Rights Record

¶11. (SBU) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress on human rights cases involving military abuse or collaboration with paramilitaries. We continually emphasize the importance of creating a legal system that delivers credible, timely results. On June 10, Uribe announced a proposal to ensure civilians investigate and review all criminal cases against military defendants to ensure transparency in human rights cases. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police. Less than two percent of human rights violations are

attributable to government security forces, according to GOC statistics. Homicides fell by 16 percent - to the lowest level in 18 years - kidnappings by 62 percent, and forced displacements by 27 percent in 2005. The GOC has a difficult but active dialogue with human rights groups, the United Nations, and foreign governments.

Extradition

¶12. (SBU) President Uribe is a strong supporter of the U.S.-Colombia extradition relationship. Since taking office, he has approved more than 390 extraditions to the United States. President Uribe has approved but suspended the extradition of four AUC leaders to ensure their continued cooperation in the AUC demobilization process.

Demobilization and Peace Process

¶13. (SBU) The GOC began negotiations with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 2002. The AUC demobilization process began in November 2003 and ended in August 2006. A total of 31,638 paramilitaries demobilized. In addition, over 12,000 individual members of the FARC, ELN and AUC have deserted and entered the government's reinsertion program since 2002 -- over 50 percent of these deserters were members of the FARC.

¶14. (SBU) The reinsertion program has limited funding and some logistical problems, but is slowly improving. Colombia has requested U.S. aid for the demobilization and reinsertion process. In FY06, Congress approved up to USD 20 million in demobilization assistance, subject to certification. The USG has demarched numerous allies, with some success, to financially support these processes.

¶15. (SBU) In July 2005, President Uribe signed the Law of Justice and Peace, which governs demobilization for ex-paramilitaries who have committed human rights abuses. The Law offers demobilized terrorists who have committed human rights abuses a five- to eight-year alternate sentence, followed by a two-and-a-half to four-year parole period, but only if they fully demobilize, turn over all illicit assets, release all hostages and child soldiers, make a complete confession of their crimes, and make reparations (actual or symbolic) to victims. Individuals or groups organized for the sole purpose of drug trafficking or illicit enrichment are not eligible for reduced sentences; only crimes committed during membership in the illegal armed group are covered. Rigorous implementation of the law is key to ensuring peace and justice in Colombia.

¶16. (SBU) On November 17, Uribe strongly supported recent Supreme Court actions against Colombian Congressmen allegedly associated with paramilitary crimes, and said the State had to proceed with "more severity" when public figures were accused of violating the law. He emphasized Colombia needed to be free of guerrilla and paramilitary influence, and said democratic institutions must govern.

¶17. (SBU) The Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS) has identified 22 groups of former demobilized paramilitaries who are involved in criminal activities. It estimated there were a total of 3,000 criminal group members, among them common criminals, narcotraffickers, paramilitaries who never demobilized, and former demobilized paramilitaries. The percentage of the former demobilized paramilitaries participating was still small, but former mid-level commanders were instrumental in forming some groups.

¶18. (SBU) The National Liberation Army (ELN) began preliminary discussions with the GOC in Cuba in December 2005 aimed at laying the groundwork for peace talks. The parties intend to begin substantive talks in December.

U.S. Hostages

¶19. (SBU) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are the longest held U.S. hostages in the world. Their safe release continues to be a top priority. The Colombians are providing full assistance. Uribe has assured us that the U.S. hostages will be included in any humanitarian exchange, but in October he suspended GOC outreach for such talks after the FARC exploded a bomb at a military facility in Bogota. Uribe stressed the GOC would be willing to resume efforts to discuss this issue with the FARC, but only if the group ceased terrorist actions.
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